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ABSTRACT

Use of the casebook--selected magazine articles on a given subject, copied, stapled and given to each student--generates enthusiasm and improves the quality of high school sophomore research papers. The casebook approach ensures that no student is left behind in the topic selection or information gathering stages, and the teacher's familiarity with the materials allows more effective feedback during the organization and writing phases. Two topics are selected by student consensus two weeks prior to the research paper unit. The teacher then assembles and copies an 18-26 page casebook for each topic, from which students are expected to generate 40-100 note cards and a 4-10 page paper. (These articles are found using the Readers' Guide, and assembly of the casebooks from start to finish requires about four hours outside of class). Before receiving their casebooks, however, students practice taking notes and then pulling them together into a first draft. After that the students take notes from their casebooks, and the teacher reviews again how to pull the notes together into a draft. At this point the teacher gives the students a copy of a well-written research paper from the previous year as a format model. In spite of the disadvantages of this approach, more students finish the paper with less frustration, and the quality of writing is higher. (HTH)

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CASEBOOK APPROACH TO WRITING THE RESEARCH PAPER

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Hal Heaberlin

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Last spring, after I had graded and handed back the second drafts of their research papers, I polled my sophomores: "How many of you liked the research paper better than most of the other English work you have done this year?" Hands went up from a clear majority. Magic? No. Casebook? Yes. A casebook and a couple of practice sessions. By casebook, I mean selected magazine articles on a given subject, copied, then stapled, one for each student.

For years I used a more traditional approach: "Choose your own topic, find your own material." I allowed a full six weeks for it, and we did most of the work in the library. I found, however, that only the well-disciplined among my students were meeting the final deadline with a satisfactory second draft. The majority were lost along the way:

> 'I changed my subject again.'
> 'I'm going down to Willard [city library] tonight to see if I can find some books.'
> 'I left my books and magazines at home.'

Using the casebook closes many of the cracks that the undisciplined fall through. Every student starts off with his own copy of the already-prepared casebook, so that no one is lost to the choosing-a-subject or gathering-information stages. Even if a student says, "I forgot my casebook at home," it still doesn't mean that he wastes a class period.

"I just happen to have one here that you may use this hour," I say.

Also we stay in the classroom, where the temptation to "visit" is less than in the library. With the casebook, I allow three weeks, exactly half the time that I allotted previously, and most students finish a satisfactory second draft.

The real payoff, however, is that my familiarity with the material means that I can be much more helpful in the organizing and writing stages of the paper--help that I cannot give when faced with topics going in ninety different directions and books and issues of magazines I have never seen before.

Step 1 Choosing the Topic

By consensus students select two topics (at least two weeks before the unit is to begin). This is hashed out a couple of weeks before the unit actually begins, to give me time to collect magazine articles and run off copies enough for each student's casebook. The topics must be currently in the news, in order for me to find a sufficient number of articles for an 18-26 page casebook, 26 being the maximum number that a single staple will hold securely. (I expect 40-100 notecards and a 4-10 page paper from those 18-26 pages.) I put two dead horses, drugs and sports, off limits at the outset. This last spring we wrote on Missing Children and Falling Oil Prices. In previous years we have written on Teenage Suicide, Cults, Shampoo, Black Holes in Space, Home Computers, and Rubic's Cubes.

The subject getting the most votes is usually a social issue; the second highest, technical or science related. Letting students choose between two subjects seems to satisfy most, especially if they think that I would prefer just one, and have to be talked into running off articles for two.

Step 2 Putting the Casebooks Together

Finding magazine articles first in the **Reader's Guide** and then in our magazine stacks takes me about two hours. Add another hour for running off copies on a

CS 210 105

copy machine. Stapling the casebooks, requiring numerous trips around a long table on which the pages are placed, can be done by the students themselves, assembly-line fashion. Four hours outside of class will do it, not as time consuming as one might imagine.

Step 3 Practice Sessions

Before I turn students loose with a casebook, in fact even before I hand it out, I have students practice the two stages in the research process where I anticipate the most trouble: (1) taking notes, and then once the notes are all taken, (2) pulling the notes together into a first draft.

We practice the single most troublesome stage first--putting a paper together from notecards. I pass out to each student two sheets of paper on which I have taken nine notes on black holes in space, from three sources. We then go through the process of writing what I call a "mini research paper" from those nine notes--in class where they can ask, and I can field, questions. I emphasize the two things that they must do in order for it to be a legitimate research paper: (1) Indicate what is borrowed, and (2) indicate where you got it. I don't get fancy with footnotes for this practice paper. I simply have them write "SD" for **Science Digest**, "T" for **Time**, and "WB" for **World Book**, after what needs to be cited. This is the first time many of them have ever weaved together notes from more than one source into a single paragraph.

The next day we practice the second most troublesome part of the research paper--taking notes. I use a magazine article on black dialect. I hand out the article and fifteen notecards to each student. Then I say, "Here is an article like those in the casebook. I want you to watch me take notes on the chalkboard, and I want you to copy exactly what I write." I then draw four big notecard rectangles on the chalkboard and begin, mumbling to myself, debating whether to quote or paraphrase, remembering to put at the bottom of the card where I got the information, occasionally forgetting, to test student attentiveness.

After I have done four or five notecards, I put the class on their own for the rest of the article, leaving time enough at the end of the class to compare what each of us thought was important enough to take down on notecards.

Step 4 Taking Notes and Writing the Paper

By this time, we have used about three class periods, no student is behind schedule, and we are ready to start on the casebooks. I hand out the casebooks and students start to take notes. Because they have had some practice taking notes, rarely do I have a student on that first day of notetaking who leaves class without feeling positive about his chances for success on this paper.

After several days of notetaking in class, then a day or two for sorting cards and outlining, that day finally arrives for students to start on their first drafts. At that time, I hand back their black holes in space mini research papers (I have kept them until now), and we review the process of weaving notes together. Then, instead of loading students down with reams of mechanical instructions, I simply give them a copy of a well-written, six-page research paper from a previous year and say, "Make yours look like this." With their mini research papers under their belts and a full length "A" example paper in front of them, most students are able to put together a legitimate first draft, a first draft which indicates what is borrowed and where they got it.

When first drafts start to come in, I use both in-class and outside-of-class time for grading. I spend ten to fifteen minutes grading each first draft, but I simply read through the second draft for a grade, noting whether or not suggestions made on the first draft have been carried out. I have learned to schedule at least three days between the first draft deadline and the second, to allow for grading and re-writing.

The system of footnoting that I use for the final draft is the MLA's parenthetical number system, in which the bibliography is numbered and when cited in the text, looks like this: "Abusive parents have often been abused themselves as children" (3, 42). The first number corresponds to the number in the

bibliography. The second is the page number. (**MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers**, second edition, 1984)

Summary

Casebook disadvantages

1. Students do not learn how to use library resources.
2. Interest in a chosen-by-consensus subject isn't as keen as an individually chosen one.
3. No teacher in his right mind wants to read a foot high stack of papers on the same subject.

Casebook advantages

1. More students finish the paper, with less frustration.
2. The unit takes three weeks rather than six.
3. The quality of the writing is higher, more weaving together of notes from different sources, not to mention the absence of plagiarism.
4. Because I am familiar with the sources used, I can give students more help.
5. It is an alternative when school library resources are inadequate.

Students can still lose their notecards of course, and a few students will refuse to footnote because "Mr. Bloomfield didn't make us last year," but in general more students, even the undisciplined, will be able to experience that rarefied air which awaits those who reach the top of that English class mountain known as the research paper.

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